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Searching with a Fine-toothed Comb: combs for humans and horses on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database

Steven P. Ashby and Angie Bolton

To many users of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) database, hair combs might seem an unusual focus for study. They are not commonly found by metal-detectorists or other members of the public, and the number recorded on the database (23 at the time of writing) is diminutive in comparison with the numbers recovered as part of controlled excavations (around 200 combs and fragments are known from the excavations at 16-24 Coppergate, York alone). This disparity relates to the fact that the vast majority of Roman to post-medieval combs were manufactured in organic materials such as bone and antler, and their often poorly preserved remains (offering little resistance to the plough) are unlikely to be found by any but the most keen-sighted of detectorists.

Why then, devote a paper to the study of the small quantity of combs on the PAS database, given the far larger numbers known from elsewhere? While the database sample is small and cannot be taken as representative of the UK corpus as a whole it is an interesting subset. Indeed, the combs represented on the database differ markedly (in raw materials, form and ornament) from the majority discovered through archaeological excavation. This is probably a result of the differences in methods of collection. This volume, celebrating as it does the 10th anniversary of the PAS, seems an appropriate venue for a discussion of these objects, as it provides the opportunity to consider some of the potential for future study and understanding of these combs. One of us (SPA) has a specialism in hair combs

of the medieval period, while the other (AB) recently recorded an Iron Age example (WAW-250340). It thus seemed sensible to pool our ideas and resources and assess what could be gleaned from the small but interesting sample.

Apart from a particularly fine and well preserved Roman example from Northamptonshire (NARC-242E72) and a number of more poorly preserved Anglo-Saxon to medieval examples, bone and antler combs are poorly represented on the PAS database (for the reasons outlined above). Readers with an interest in the bone and antler combs typical of the British Isles are referred to the syntheses by Ashby (2006), MacGregor (1985: 77-95), and Tuohy (1999). Herein, our intention is simply to focus on a few combs of particular interest.

An Iron Age comb of bronze from Warwickshire

The first comb of interest is a cast copper-alloy comb from Tanworth-in-Arden, Warwickshire (WAW-250340; Fig. 1) dating to the late Iron Age. The comb was found in 2006 by Russell Peach and is an exceptional example of Iron Age metallurgy, measuring only 64 mm long by 53 mm high and featuring complex cast ornament. It is extremely unusual, with the only parallel known to the authors on display in the Bibracte museum (in the French province of Saone and Loire) (Sally Worrell, pers. comm.), though even this differs in important respects from the PAS example.

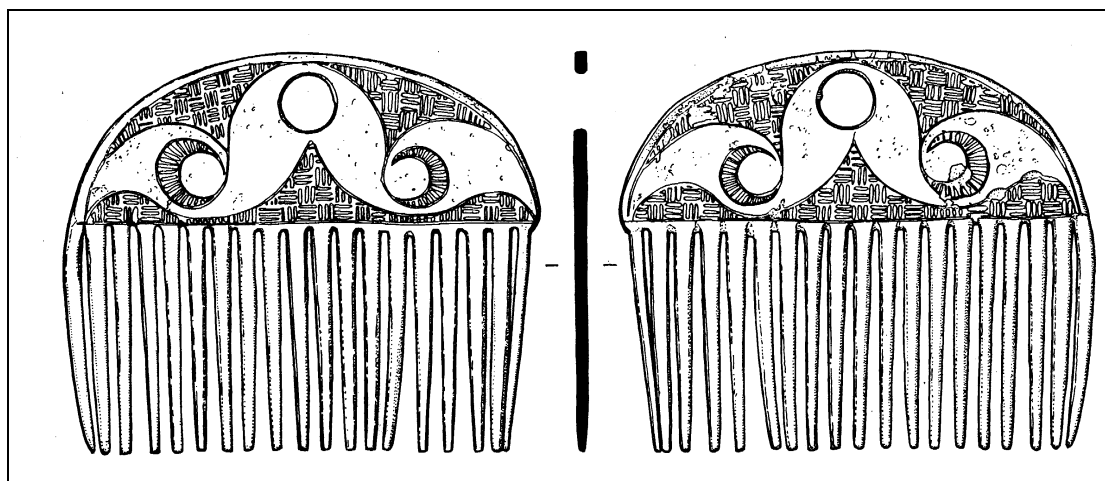


Fig. 1: Iron Age comb from Tanworth-in-Arden, Warwickshire (Candy Stevens).

The Tanworth-in-Arden comb is made of copper, tin (tin content is between 12-15% which is in the upper range, but could be partly due to tin enrichment at the surface) and arsenic (a minor element often found in Iron Age bronze) (Mary Davis pers. comm.) and is cast in a single piece. It is sub-rectangular in profile, with a shallow plano-convex back. Nineteen teeth are intact, but originally there were twenty; the missing tooth was broken in antiquity and the comb re-shaped to hide the break. A large decorated field lies above the teeth, and on both faces this field is filled with cast 'mirror-style' ornament with the armadillo motif being predominant on a cross-hatched background, within a plain border. At the centre of the field lies a circular perforation of 7.2 mm diameter, presumably intended for suspension, and it is notable that this feature is incorporated into the design, suggesting careful planning prior to casting. Further decoration is apparent on the comb ends.

The comb is perhaps most notable for its decoration, which bears considerable similarity to that seen on late Iron Age (c. 40-70 AD) mirrors (see for instance Jope 2000: pls. 240, 242, 246-47), spoons and terrets (c. 25-75 AD), and is considered to be of Insular (British or Irish) origin rather than Continental (Adam Gwilt, pers. comm.). Direct comb parallels are few, and the only comparable metallic example (from the museum in Bibracte) differs in ornament, form and tooth gauge. The latter feature is particularly important, as it may suggest a difference in function.

Thus, the utility of the comb is not certain. The coarse tooth gauge might lead one to propose a use as an equestrian grooming comb (Sara Wear, pers. comm.), as has been assumed for large, ornate, coarse-toothed combs of later periods (see, for example, the "*pferdekämme*" from Birka: Ambrosiani 1981: 68-69). In contrast, the comb may simply have been an unusually coarse hair or beard comb. It was discovered on the periphery of the Iron Age mirror distribution across southern England. Its findspot and decoration may therefore suggest that it was used in association with mirrors. The comb may have been used primarily for display as a form of jewellery or dress accessory, and may even have had a purely symbolic role (see below). Of course, these alternatives are not mutually exclusive and such a comb may have a multitude of meanings and purposes, contingent on the contexts in which it was used.

The comb's use of 'mirror style' ornament is particularly interesting. One might ask why two objects of different form would share similar ornamental traits. Could one propose that the Iron Age comb and mirror were in some way conceptually linked? It might well be that such objects were manufactured and used together, forming part of a 'grooming set', or there may have been more symbolic or even eschatological concerns involved. With this in mind, it is notable that Pictish sculpture in Scotland very frequently features 'mirror' and 'comb' symbols, and that one very rarely appears without the other. Such sculpture probably dates no earlier than the 4th or 5th centuries AD (Smith 2003: 113) and is thus

considerably removed from the Tanworth comb in both time and space, but the possibility of a shared understanding of 'mirror and comb' as part of a conceptual framework is intriguing.

What could this meaning be? One possibility, first mooted by Andrea Smith (2000, 2003) in her study of combs in Pictish sculpture, is that they formalised the relationships between tribal leaders. Thus, in the 4th and 5th centuries, the carved depictions of combs in Pictish sculpture stood for the combs exchanged between the Anglo-Saxon and Pictish elite as diplomatic gifts. Arguably, combs played an important role in the maintenance of such alliances in the face of common enemies to the south (Smith 2003: 113-14).

Smith supports this concept with documentary evidence for the exchange of mirrors and combs of precious metals in Anglo-Saxon England during the early 600s (*ibid.*; Bede, *HEA* II.11), while there is evidence that similar objects were exchanged between members of the ecclesiastical elite as late as the 8th century AD (Sorrell 1996). Silver combs have been reported from Viking-Age hoards of precious metals (Graham-Campbell 1987: 337-38), and large antler combs from this period may also have been exchanged in this manner (Ros 1992; Ashby 2006).

It is thus clear that there was a long-lived early medieval tradition of combs being used as diplomatic gifts. Whether it is possible to push the origins of this tradition back into the Roman period, or even the pre-Roman Iron Age is a moot point, but there is no reason to rule out such a possibility. It is accepted that reciprocal gift exchange played an important role in the maintenance of social and political relationships in prehistoric Europe (Mauss 1925; Gosden 1985; Creighton 2006: 14-45). Combs were clearly part of the repertoire of Iron Age material culture and their apparent scarcity might well be suggestive of a particular high status. Moreover, there is reason to suspect that items constructed in high cost materials, and designed expressly for the purpose of grooming a subject, held status associations. Indeed, the use of such objects may have been bound up with concepts of the identity and the self, or even of religion and the magical properties of hair. The existence of such beliefs and associations is well established in ethnographic study (Berg 1951; Leach 1958; Hallpike 1969; Derrett 1973) while there are also traces in early medieval and later literature and archaeology (Smyser 1995; Bartlett 1994; Venclová 2002; see Ashby 2006 for a review).

Alternatively, if combs such as the Tanworth-in-Arden example had equestrian associations this does little to downgrade their status; it is well known that horses have been prized possessions for much of human existence and their burial in the Iron Age is suggestive that equine veneration or respect has its origins in early antiquity. In this context, objects associated with the grooming of horses may themselves have attained a level of prestige, as carts and chariots clearly did (Dent 1985).

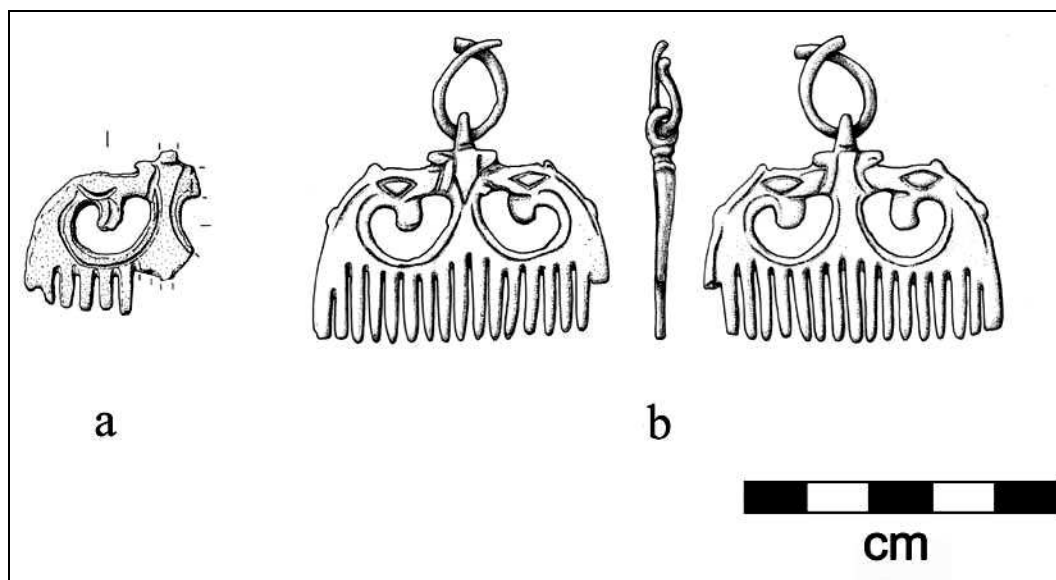


Fig. 2: Viking Age comb pendants from a) Brampton, Norfolk (Sue White) and b) South Lincolnshire (Pat Walsh).

Clearly, these ideas are at present little more than speculation. The situation is rather opaque and will only be elucidated through further research, but the fact that the Tanworth comb has been recorded with the PAS has opened up the area for further enquiry, and as such it is an extremely important find.

Two early medieval bronze comb pendants of Baltic origin

In 2003, Steven Ashley recorded a fragmentary copper-alloy openwork comb from Brampton, Norfolk (NMS-1801; Fig. 2a; Ashley and Paterson, in Geake 2003: 209). This example contains a pelta-shaped opening, with a central-stalk dividing the ornament into two zoomorphic heads. The comb preserves the remains of a suspension loop at its crest, confirming its use as a pendant.

A better-preserved example was recently recovered by a metal-detectorist in South Lincolnshire and recorded by Steve Ashby in 2007 (NARC-B3E1B5; Fig. 2b). This example, measuring only 47 mm long, is decorated with Ringerike-style zoomorphic ornament, the primary theme being a pair of in-turning zoomorphic heads, with the animals' necks represented using openwork casting. A use as a pendant is suggested by the presence of a perforation for suspension at the top centre of the comb, through which is threaded the remains of a large copper-alloy suspension ring, or perhaps the basal loop in a chain.

These artefacts are extremely unusual finds for the British Isles. Indeed, early medieval metal combs of any type are rarities in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The authors know of a bronze example recovered during early 20th-century excavations at Whitby (McIntyre 1929), and there are reports and descriptions of silver combs from the Cuerdale and Broch of Burgar hoards (Graham-Campbell 1985: 246-53; Graham-Campbell 1987: 337-38; Smith 2000: 184; Smith 2003: 114). These combs are broadly contemporary with typological dates for the

South Lincolnshire and Brampton examples (the Cuerdale hoard was deposited c. 1005 AD, while the Burgar hoard has been dated to the late 8th century, see Graham-Campbell 1985: 257), and they are consistent with a use in gift exchange (see above). However, in the Burgar case the artefact itself is now lost, while the Cuerdale comb is fragmentary. The significance of the PAS examples, then, is clear.

In detail, the form of these combs (or comb-shaped pendants as they are more properly termed) is only closely paralleled in the area around the Baltic Sea. Here, bronze examples can be dated to the centuries immediately following 1000 AD, and seem to be based on slightly earlier bone prototypes. They are known from northwest Russia, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania, with rare examples from Estonia and Sweden (presumably arriving by means of the Baltic's thriving trade network). Furthermore, zoomorphic ornament is not uncommon on comb-shaped pendants in this region (Luik 1999: 156), and all in all, one can be fairly confident that the PAS examples represent artefacts displaced (by trade or travel) from this part of north-east Europe.

Most interestingly, many examples have very short teeth, while there are examples from Finland and Latvia that lack teeth altogether, suggesting that their key role may have been as dress accessories or symbols, rather than functioning toilet implements. Indeed, there are also a number of medieval axe- and knife-shaped pendants from the Baltic area, and it may be more appropriate to see the comb pendants in question as part of this tradition, rather than as combs in and of themselves. Several Baltic examples are known from hoards, while burial evidence demonstrates that such combs were worn close to the chest, shoulder or waist, with one particular example suspended on a chain only 50 mm long; far too short to allow use in personal grooming while attached. Indeed, some may have been suspended on a chain between two brooches, while still other examples may have been used as part of elaborate head-dresses (*ibid.*: 158-59). Their

role within a repertoire of items used in personal display thus seems assured; their use was not restricted to that of a simple grooming tool.

Notwithstanding the above, bone comb pendants of similar form do show evidence of use wear on their teeth (*ibid.*: 158). Such ‘beading’ would not be visible on copper alloy examples, but it is of course possible that they were also used in this way. In sum, the situation is ambiguous, but it seems certain that these comb pendants had an important role in display. This must have been particularly true in Britain, where such items would have been truly exotic and communicated powerful messages of identity and ethnicity (see below).

The presence in late Viking Age England of combs of undoubted northern European origin is interesting. Given the legacy of Norse contact in other regions (northern Scotland in particular, see Barrett 2003), one might assume that close ties between Britain and Scandinavia were maintained into the 10th and 11th centuries. However, this does not seem to be the case for northern England, at least on the basis of artefactual evidence. For example, the paucity of Scandinavian imports identified in Viking Age levels at York has been commented on previously (Richards 2000: 121), while the bone and antler combs from the settlement show closest affinities with Irish material (see Ashby 2006).

In this context, artefacts that show close associations with Scandinavia are noteworthy. A small number of 10th- to 12th-century bone and antler combs excavated at sites including York, Lincoln and Northampton have been identified as being of undoubted northern European manufacture (see Ashby 2006) and betray the presence of individuals with close Scandinavian connections. The copper alloy combs recorded with the PAS can surely be added to this group. They are of particular interest, as they can be linked with eastern Scandinavia and the Baltic, and thus add nuance to the traditional model that draws lines between Viking Age Britain and Norway and Denmark. Some level of contact between Britain and the eastern Baltic in the late Viking Age and medieval period is uncontroversial, but this concept has frequently been overlooked in synthetic works.

Notwithstanding the above, it is clear that these combs are among a very few indicators of north-eastern European contact, and it is necessary to consider the means by which they may have reached Britain. Indirect (down-the-line) exchange seems unlikely, given their idiosyncrasy and the powerful ethnic symbolism that may have been a corollary (see below). Direct trade with the region is conceivable, but if this occurred on any scale, then the scarcity of such combs in England relative to ‘insular’ and Anglo-Scandinavian types requires explanation. An alternative dispersal mechanism is reciprocal exchange; metal combs in particular may have been exchanged between members of the political elite of the respective regions as diplomatic gifts (see above). Their rarity, even in north-eastern Europe, might support such a model. However, perhaps the simplest explanation is that they reached England as the possessions of

migrants, merchants, mercenaries, political envoys or other travellers.

As the possessions of migrants from the Baltic region, or items acquired by travelling Anglo-Scandinavians, these combs say little about large scale political or economic networks. Rather, each comb is best understood in its own terms, rather than as part of the group. While context information is important in the construction of object biographies (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999), and such data is not available for the present examples, it is nonetheless instructive to reflect on the role that they may have played upon reaching English shores.

It is certain that such combs acted as symbols of identity. There is reason to believe that bone and antler combs were used in this way (Ashby 2006), but the copper alloy examples represent a greater investment in raw materials, were clearly suspended as a visible dress accessory, and, if the archaeological record is reflective, were less common than their bone equivalents. They must, therefore, have been extremely visible fields for the display of identity, be it age, gender, status, ethnicity or political affiliation. Being so different in both form and material from Anglo-Scandinavian combs, and unlike any pendants in circulation in the Danelaw, they must have been highly conspicuous in the public arena and would have actively communicated powerful messages of ‘the other’. Nonetheless, certain aspects of the pendants would have been familiar to the Anglo-Scandinavian audience. The Ringerike beasts of the South Lincolnshire pendant would, even in an unfamiliar context, have been recognisable motifs, redolent of the broad ‘Scandinavian’ artistic milieu. Thus, the messages constructed by the use of such a pendant were complex, multi-faceted and mutable, and above all conditioned by social context.

Discussion

What then, can we learn through the study of the combs from Tanworth-in-Arden, South Lincolnshire and Brampton? On the basis of its ‘mirror-style’ ornament, the Tanworth example seems likely to have been manufactured in the British Isles, while the Brampton and ‘South Lincs’ combs were produced in eastern Europe. Furthermore, the dates of manufacture of the two forms are separated by around 1000 years. This chronological and geographical disparity precludes any detailed comparison in terms of distribution or function, but some general observations are perhaps appropriate.

If nothing else, the combs appear to show a longevity or recurrence of the comb as symbol. That is to say that in both Iron Age and medieval contexts the manufacture and materials seem at odds with the combs’ sole use being as a simple toilet implement, devoid of status or identity-based associations. That is not to say that their role in grooming was insignificant; indeed, it may be this very act (whether it is the grooming of people or horses) that lent them their great symbolic resonance. It is difficult to claim any direct line of influence from the late Iron Age to the early medieval period; the combs clearly arise from

culturally discrete traditions. Nonetheless, the social significance of grooming and associated paraphernalia is well attested for the Roman period (Eckardt and Crummy 2006), while arguments have also been made for combs having a particular social significance in the Anglo-Saxon (Williams 2003) and Viking Age periods (Ashby 2006). It therefore seems that the comb, as an object of hygiene (and thus closely associated with ideas of the human body), and as a highly visible dress accessory, has repeatedly been utilised in a symbolic manner. The precise means by which it was exploited were complex and variable; it has acted as a field for both private and public display, has been used in the construction and manipulation and identity, and has been exchanged as a means of establishing and consolidating alliances and allegiances. Our understanding of such communication and negotiation must be drawn from knowledge of the context in which these exchanges took place, and it is therefore neither possible nor desirable to draw detailed comparisons or parallels between the ways in which the combs discussed above were used. Nonetheless, even if the meaning of the ornamental comb was shifting and variable, its recurrence down the centuries is of note in itself.

Conclusions and future work

In this short article it has not been possible to do any more than outline some interesting issues raised by the recovery and preservation by record of a few unusual finds. Nonetheless, it has been shown that objects on the PAS database have the potential to contribute to debates regarding social, as well as economic issues (see papers elsewhere in this volume for the latter), even when sample sizes are small. The role of small finds in the development of archaeological thought is not limited to the production of chronologies or distribution maps, neither is it necessarily precluded by the absence of detailed stratigraphic data. The number and diversity of finds on the PAS database make it an invaluable resource for archaeological investigation (particularly in rural areas) and continued targeted interrogation can only lead to further illumination.

Postscript

Since this article was written, a small number of further copper-alloy comb pendants have been identified. These include an example of unknown provenance, but reported to Kevin Leahy (Ref: North Lincolnshire Museums 2483; thanks to Jane Kershaw for bringing this to our attention), and one from Mareham on the Hill, Lincolnshire, identified by Adam Daubney (PAS: LIN-DD07D2). The Lincolnshire clustering may in part be related to recovery bias, but is interesting. Notwithstanding, these objects seem to be a little more common in the British Isles than previously thought. Given their clear associations with eastern Scandinavia, their presence in the British Isles is interesting, and should they continue to be found, may tell us something of the organisation of Baltic and North Sea trade and travel. We await further discoveries.

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